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ABSTRACT

This study examined faculty attitudes toward doctoral persistence, using open-ended interviews with 40 faculty in 6 disciplines at a Carnegie Classification Research I university. It found that the overriding theme that emerged from the interviews was the investment of time and energy with doctoral students. The majority of faculty reported that they had no regular or formal communication with their doctoral students, while many felt that students were not assertive enough and not committed enough to completing their degree. Faculty also discussed their role as advocate for their students, the preparation of students, and the state of the academic job market. The study concludes that faculty perspectives and expectations of students reflect internal contradictions, in that faculty expect students to be assertive and independent without realizing the highly unequal power relationship between doctoral students and faculty. Faculty themselves also take little responsibility for the progress of their students, the study noted. It also asserts that faculty perspectives were contradictory to recommendations of national policymakers for improving doctoral degree completion. (Contains 20 references.) (MDM)

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FACULTY PERSPECTIVES OF DOCTORAL PERSISTENCE WITHIN ARTS AND SCIENCE DISPLINES

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This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education held at the Marriott Hotel, Orlando, Florida, November 2-5, 1995. This paper was reviewed by ASHE and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of ASHE conference papers.

Abstract
Arts and Science Faculty Perspectives of Doctoral Student Persistence

The purpose of this study was to examine and analyze faculty perspectives on doctoral persistence. The primary data sources were interviews with arts and science faculty. Faculty perspectives about doctoral persistence emerged into three major categories of investments: (1) interpersonal; (2) sociopsychological; and, (3) occupational.

Introduction

The nation's doctoral education establishment is widely recognized and respected throughout the world. American colleges and universities are the top priority for foreign students worldwide who seek advanced degrees abroad [5]. Despite the apparent success of the doctoral education system, concerns have been raised about the amount of time students are taking to complete their programs and the attrition rate of doctoral students [6,7]. According to an Association of American Universities report [1], many students who enroll in doctoral programs are taking longer than is reasonable to complete their degrees or not completing them at all. In 1988, the median time-to-dgree completion was about seven years while attrition across all disciplines was 50 percent; often higher in many humanities areas [16].

The purpose of this study was to examine and analyze arts and science faculty perspectives on doctoral students' persistence based on the assumption that faculty are key players in the graduate education process. Specifically, this research sought to: 1) describe faculty perspectives of graduate education as they relate to doctoral persistence and degree completion; and, 2) build upon existing perspectives of doctoral persistence by probing the meanings, values, and priorities that faculty place on factors affecting student persistence; disclosing the ways in which the social and academic norms of a department shape and impact student success.

Various studies and perspectives [6,10,16,20] have contributed greatly to our understanding of the issues surrounding time-to-degree, attrition, and the processes involved in doctoral persistence in general. Two models of doctoral persistence form the basis for the conceptual framework for this study. Girves and Wemmerus [10] proposed a two stage model linking department and student characteristics, financial support, and students perceptions of their relationships with faculty and

advisors. The greatest predictor of doctoral degree progress, according to Girves and Wemmerus, is academic integration and the degree of involvement in one's program. Students' experiences within a department are continually modified, influencing their commitments toward completing their degrees.

A second model, advanced by Tinto [20], posits that doctoral persistence is shaped not only by personal and intellectual interactions between students and faculty, but also by the student-faculty communities within the academic and social structure of the department. Tinto's model expands on the Girves and Wemmerus model by considering the longitudinal nature of doctoral persistence in order to track how changes in student experience over time affect doctoral degree completion.

Studies on doctoral persistence and the Tinto and Girves and Wemmerus models have focused on doctoral persistence primarily from the perspective of the student -- wanting is any systematic analysis of doctoral persistence from the standpoint of the faculty. It is the faculty who serve as role models and mentors. It is the faculty who function as gatekeepers to their respective disciplines. It is the faculty who inculcate in students the norms, expectations, and standards of acceptable performance for the field. The faculty serve as socializing agents for students not only within the department but for the discipline at large. Finally, they have a profound influence on a student's area of specialization not only during their graduate but their professional career as well [10]. Given the importance and influence of the faculty to doctoral education and degree progress; faculty perspectives may serve as an integral component in our overall understanding of doctoral persistence.

Method

The method for this study was based on guidelines developed by Glaser and Strauss [11] for grounded theory inquiry. Grounded theory research is often referred to as the constant comparative

method of analysis in which an area of interest is identified and then, using an iterative process, data are repeatedly collected and arranged into categories [11]. Each repetition of data collection is used to verify or modify categories established from previous data collection sessions. Meanings and relationships are established and additional data collected to verify explanations. The whole process involves one of collecting new data by systematically expanding the sample in order to clarify and refine already established categories. Ultimately, the basis for a conceptual framework emerges from the data.

The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at a private comprehensive Research I institution was the study site. The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences is organized into 40 departments comprised of over 600 faculty and 1300 graduate students of which over 90% are working towards the doctorate. The School is traditional in the sense that most students enter graduate school with the intention of obtaining the Ph.D. degree as opposed to some other graduate degree. Since most students are funded throughout most of their doctoral programs it is expected that they attend full-time -- very few students are part-time unless they are in the writing stages of their dissertation.

The unit of analysis was selected faculty from departments within the College of Arts and Sciences. A purposive sampling procedure was employed. Faculty were selected from departments based on the department: (1) offering a doctorate granting program; (2) being representative of one of three broad disciplinary areas (i.e., humanities, social sciences, and sciences); and (3) having either high or low doctoral completion time and attrition rates. In all, six doctoral granting departments within the College of Arts and Sciences were selected, two from each of three broad disciplinary areas: (1) humanities (English and History); (2) social sciences (Political Science and Economics); and 3) sciences (Physics and Math). These specific departments were chosen on the basis of overall

doctoral completion and attrition rates based on statistical information supplied by the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences.

Criteria for inclusion of individual faculty included: (1) rank (i.e., professor, associate professor, or assistant professor); (2) recommendations from Directors of Graduate Studies within each department or other faculty; and, (3) level of experience advising doctoral students. The Directors of Graduate Studies within each department were also interviewed because they were closest to the demographics of students and faculty as well as the overall goals and mission of graduate education within their respective departments. Some interviews within a department were based in part on their recommendations. Interviewees were typically senior faculty (tenured) as opposed to junior (non-tenured) faculty particularly within the humanities and social science departments. Senior faculty had the most experience directing dissertations while in several departments junior faculty were not allowed to direct dissertations in order to focus more energy towards scholarly activities necessary for a favorable tenure decision.

Open-ended interviews with faculty comprised the primary data source for the study. Secondary data sources included university catalogs, departmental brochures, and departmental self-studies. A total of 40 interviews were conducted ranging in length of time from 30 minutes to 90 minutes. The average interview length was approximately one hour. Each interview was systematically coded in order to maintain the anonymity of the interviewee while providing a specific reference back to an individual interview.

Initial questions to faculty were broad and open-ended. Responses were then categorized and subsequent interview questions were driven by the categories formed from responses to preceeding questions. This alternating sequence of question-category formation evolved into five stages with

each stage representing a refinement in common themes discussed by faculty with respect to doctoral persistence. Categories derived from the five stages were then collapsed into the final three investment categories: interpersonal, sociopsychological, and occupational.

In addition to being analyzed for common themes and categories, data were also analyzed with respect to: (1) broad disciplinary area; and, (2) high/low completion times and attrition rates of students in departments. The assumptions, expectations and conventions of faculty about doctoral persistence and graduate education in general did not vary by discipline or by completion and attrition rates within department.

Results

The overriding theme emerging from interviews with faculty was investment. Faculty comments were, in one form or another, found to be commentaries on their willingness to invest time and personal energy toward their students, the graduate education process, doctoral persistence, and degree completion. Faculty perspectives with respect to doctoral persistence emerged into three primary categories of investments: 1) interpersonal; 2) sociopsychological; and, 3) occupational.

Interpersonal Investments

Interpersonal investments refer to the time and effort faculty are willing to accord to establish and maintain an interpersonal relationship with graduate students. The substance of this relationship is defined as productive and positive communications between the faculty member and graduate student and the rapport that they develop. According to Bligh [4], graduate students frequently cite isolation, poor rapport, and insufficient contact with their faculty advisors as being a major contributor to attrition and lengthening the time to complete their degrees. Furthermore, a study by

Hartnett and Katz [12] found that graduate students reported having little contact with their professors and when contact was made, it was often unsatisfactory.

The majority of faculty interviewed stated having no regular or formal communication schedule with their graduate students. Instead, faculty tended to rely on more informal means such as posted office hours. Faculty, typically, did not give their students deadlines or require that students periodically check-in. They emphatically asserted that it was not their responsibility to seek students out if they have not heard from them in a while. These actions or lack of actions were rationalized by faculty when indicating that persistence and "sticking to it" should be inherent characteristics of doctoral students. Further, the faculty indicated that they expected students to maintain a regular communication schedule and to take the initiative in seeking their advise.

> Students should take the initiative to seek advise from their advisors when there is a problem. There is a tendency on their part not to do this.

> I expect students to certainly maintain some sort of regular communication with me. But I don't tell them they should do this -- it just sort of evolves from how ever that student works.

Faculty described a range of student personality characteristics that they felt made interactions and therefore interpersonal investment in a student difficult if not impossible. Students were described by faculty as defensive in their chronic complaints of being overworked. Faculty frequently characterized students as being too timid, unassertive, perfectionist, and arrogant to the point of all-knowing. Often students were described as having personalities which made it difficult for both student peers and faculty to get along with them. Students unable to focus in on a topic and make up their minds were cited by faculty as making things more difficult for themselves than need be.

> When I have trouble with students it is because of a defensiveness a self-protectiveness on their part. They are continually defending themselves against too much work and too little time. They give too little emphasis in achieving high

> professional standards. They have too much concern about getting it over fast -- minimizing their investment.

Faculty advisors routinely reported that their students were not assertive. A number of faculty consistently portrayed students as being too timid and unassertive, writing only to please their advisor. According to many faculty, when students do have an idea they do not want the idea shattered and, as a result, their writing is too timid. In a study by Heiss [13], nearly half of the student respondents in all disciplines would have preferred greater assurance and evaluation of their status from their advisor. In this study, faculty routinely appeared to guard against a natural overdependency by students on faculty approval of their ideas and work.

> I don't like it when they [students] feel they can just stop by and shoot the bull. It is destructive because they become so dependent on or feel they need to "test" their ideas out on me.

Faculty reported that constant interruptions by a student reflected an overdependency on faculty approval of opinions and work. Yet, these faculty also noted that students often tend to ignore the advice and feedback that faculty provide. Faculty stated that they were unwilling to invest time, energy, and resources in students who seemed unable to focus in on a topic.

In the Heiss study [13], it was found that eighty percent of the students surveyed expressed a need for greater structure in their doctoral programs. The ideal advisor was described by students as one who was a good mentor -- who briefed students on the hurdles they would encounter in their program and on the best strategies to use in overcoming these hurdles. In contrast, as professors become increasingly overburdened with more students they feel they have less time to give to mentoring activities. Other faculty simply see mentoring as a label for having to pay more attention to students which they not only have the time to give; but think is unwise to give for fear of increasing student dependency on faculty. Some faculty advisors viewed the concept of mentoring with

resentment, reading it, in today's environment, as having to be "nice," "friendly," "sweet," and "non-threatening" to students which runs counter to faculty's advising and teaching style.

> Mentoring to me is really a lot of cheap talk--it means very little too me.

> Mentoring is just the latest in a series of buzzwords. To me it has the connotation of being sweet -- not being scary to people. I don't like the term. The theme these days seems to be non-threatening -- the authority figure is not supposed to be threatening.

Sociopsychological Investments

Sociopsychological investments pertain to the extent to which faculty were willing to expend thought, time, or energy helping graduate students understand the cultural values, assumptions, beliefs, attitudes, and norms of the department and discipline. According to Coombs and St. John [8], it is the process of helping someone develop a sense of identity with their respective department and field of study.

All the departments included in this study had various formal procedures (e.g., interviews for prospective students, brochures describing department and faculty interests, directors of graduate studies) related to graduate education. Yet, despite these formal measures, some faculty described the academic and social integration of students into the department as being too informal and variable while others faculty expressed outright indifference to student's socialization.

> We should think more about academic and social integration into the department and discipline, but in reality, it ebbs and flows depending on who the Chair is and the composition of the graduate students.

> Getting students socialized is not our problem. In fact, I would prefer they be less socialized so that when I have to kick them out it is not so traumatic.

Faculty in all departments voiced their difficulty in dismissing students from the program or communicating to the students that it might be in their best interests to leave the program. They

expressed concern about the number of marginal students being passed onto candidacy, citing that it was easier to pass students on to candidacy than to ask them to leave the program.

> At the onset, I think it is better to keep students at arms length until you get a sense of their quality. It is very hard to tell students to leave--it is owning up to the fact that someone has to say "go away." It is hard to do. Usually, we [faculty] don't want to say anything and students don't want to hear it--we just can't bring ourselves to be the bearer of bad news.

> Many students are wasting their time. They should drop out faster and sooner. It will hurt but is probably best for us and for them in the long run. We have all these tests that are supposed to weed people out but we don't ever do it.

Faculty were asked to comment on their perceptions and expectations of student's commitments towards degree progress and completion. On the one hand, faculty expectations of students were of almost total commitment to their graduate studies if they are to survive the first year or two.

> They have got to have total commitment if they are going to succeed...be focused with great intensity...if they can get by without doing this then our standards have become to lax.

> I say I am tolerant of less but on the other hand, I really do want them to only be concerned with their work and research and nothing else...as faculty we are balancing a number of things, so why shouldn't they.

Yet on the other hand, when asked what they could or should do to establish or maintain student's commitment and hence their integration into the department and discipline, faculty frequently expressed a sense of helplessness implying that commitment must be generated intrinsically from within the student.

> Staying committed has all got to come from within the student. If they can't write a thesis without my help-- they will never survive after graduate school.

Faculty revealed a number of their own behaviors that perhaps serve to hinder or disrupt communications and, hence, the strength of students' integration into the department. They

acknowledged expressing themselves to students in inappropriate and undiplomatic ways such as being brusque, using angry words, or reprimanding students in front of other students. They noted differences among students' reactions to faculty communication behaviors--eliciting very little response from superb students to almost total devastation of their not so superb students.

> I am probably too hard on them, too brusque. If a student comes in and tells me nonsense--I tell them it is BS and nonsense and to go away and come back when they have thought things through. I am terribly undiplomatic in how I give students criticism and feedback. I have observed that the really good students can deal with me at that level and give it back as easily as I give it out. The poorer students don't have the same level of self-confidence.

Occupational Investments

For faculty, occupational investments center around achieving a balance between the time and energy they felt was necessary to invest in their own occupational goals and in helping graduate students achieve their occupational goals. Faculty occupational goals were gaining acceptance by the department and discipline as respected, productive scholars and educators which occurs through their scholarly efforts as well as the scholarly efforts of their students. Faculty believed that they and their departments invest a significant amount of time, energy, and resources in students and in return, could expect a certain level of productivity from their students. Furthermore, they felt that often their research, reputation, and prestige within the discipline was dependent upon the quantity and quality of the work of their graduate students. Faculty acknowledged a wide range in the quality of the students they advise. The quality and quantity of student productivity appeared to be a bottom line with many faculty since this can impact the faculty member's reputation within the department and the discipline at large.

Faculty concerns regarding their reputation and prestige became apparent from the manner in which they described relating to superb and not so superb students. Students that produce quality

work allow the advisors to be an advocate for both themselves and their students. Faculty will not "go out on a limb" for students who they feel are not of top quality; this in itself severely impacts many student's occupational investments and options.

> Partly I am an advocate for myself. If a student of mine is doing well--I tell others. It is partly self-promotion for me. I can say to my colleagues "look how well I have done."

> The superb students I try to treat as junior colleagues...the not so superb, I suggest something. They go off and then come back and state, "I did this and that-now what?"

Faculty appeared quite ill at ease with the level of preparation of incoming students. Interviewees overwhelmingly cited poor undergraduate preparation as a major contributor to socialization problems and increased degree completion time encountered by students. They argued that to be competitive on the job market students must overcome their deficiencies which invariably increases the time necessary to complete the degree.

> My perception is that our higher than average degree completion times are necessary because of the background and preparation of our incoming students...if we want to graduate students who are competitive nationally, then we better let them take the time to get competitive. It is a mistake to artificially push them out the door before they are ready.

Faculty across all disciplines expressed overwhelming concern about the current state of the job market, academic and otherwise. A number of interviewees reported that very few, if any, of their graduates in recent years have secured a job for which they were trained. Faculty appeared keenly aware of the current market situation, yet, they were ambiguous about their role in limiting entry into programs or informing students about a dismal job situation.

> We recruit students into graduate school on the basis of false promises or very unclear expectations of what they are getting into, especially if the job market remains as it is. Then we are simply educating them for unemployement.

> Given today's job market, it seems socially irresponsible to train people who can't get a job, we are sort of deceiving them in a way. But, students should be aware of what is going on in the world, so it is not totally fair for them to claim they have been duped.

A number of faculty acknowledged that the criteria for entry into the academic profession has become more demanding in recent years, noting an inverse relationship between the number of available job openings and the criteria necessary for getting hired. As jobs have become scarcer, the criteria for getting hired has become higher. According to Baird [3], in the process of preparing students within their fields, departments create a culture with pressures and expectations which do not necessarily relate to the preparation of students for their roles as academics. Faculty talked about how, in the past, it was acceptable in many disciplines for students to go out on the job market as ABD's. However, today, this practice is almost non-existent because departments now can insist that the dissertation be completed before hiring an applicant. They believed that when students enter the job market they present themselves with credentials similar to someone who has been in the profession a number of years. This has led to a situation in which students tend to remain in their doctoral programs to hone their skills in both teaching and research in hopes of entering the market with fairly well established publication records.

> Students are taking a long time [to finish] because of all the anxieties they have about having to present oneself as a finished product. Now students should be entering the job market looking like they have been in the profession for a couple of years.

Faculty observed that students are currently receiving too much specialized training within their subspecialties.

> This department provides no cross-training for non-academic careers. We don't have a career or job advisor because the new Ph.D.'s first job is usually a postdoc position which is usually obtained through his advisor's contacts.

In several programs, faculty conceded that the curriculum is too static and inward looking--structured towards continued production of academics during a time when few academic positions exist. They acknowledged that faculty and departments have done little in the way of cross-training students for non-academic careers. Very few departments offer career or job placement advising. This conspicuous lack of response on the part of departments and faculty to the worsening job market only serves to further exacerbate students' entry into the job market.

Discussion

There were two major findings with respect to faculty perspectives of doctoral persistence. First, faculty perspectives and expectations of students reflected internal contradictions. Second, faculty perspectives were contradictory to recommendations of national policy makers for improving doctoral degree completion. The reflected appraisals of faculty may greatly influence students' perceptions of themselves and whether or not their own identities are perceived to be socially and intellectually in agreement or at odds with the prevailing culture of the department and discipline. Rosen and Bates [17] pointed out that, for students, graduate school may be construed as a threat-oriented environment. Few faculty probably realize the extent of this threat or its potential for disrupting or undermining students' persistence in achieving their goal of degree completion. These threats, according to Rosen and Bates, may arise because graduate students are evaluated by a relatively small number of faculty who are in close contact with one another and who collectively hold the fate of a student in their hands.

Most of the faculty that were interviewed routinely mentioned that they viewed students as too immature in their respective fields to help establish standards or make decisions relevant to their education. Unintentionally, this encourages dependence by students on the faculty; a studen

characteristic faculty consistently expressed frustration with and associated with lessor quality students. In contradiction to this, however, graduate education, according to the faculty, places a great deal of emphasis and importance on the students' development of highly critical and innovative approaches toward their subject areas. Students are urged and expected to be independent in their scholarly endeavors.

Faculty may be perceived by students as a source of danger. This may account for behaviours that faculty characterize as unassertive, timid, and non-risk taking. Graduate faculty are in a position to evaluate students' work collectively and eliminate them from the program at any one of several stages. As a result students may feel a heightened sense of threat which may hinder their communications with faculty. However, as Rosen and Bates [17] mentioned, expecting a student to be independent in an authoritarian social structure presents a paradoxical situation not recognized by the faculty. On one hand, faculty advisors frequently mentioned that students should be focused, clever, innovative, analytical, and question the existing body of knowledge in their subject areas. On the other hand, faculty remain the sole judge as to what students must do and how well they go about it. The result may be to make one of the primary objectives of graduate training in the eyes of the faculty, the development of independent scholars, difficult.

The contractictory nature of faculty perceptions and reported behaviors with graduate students may hinder the students academic intergration and the development of social and academic faculty-student communities within a department, two important elements of doctoral persistence according to Tinto [20] and Girves and Wemmerus [10]. It would seem, based on faculty responses in this study, that faculty assume very little responsiblity for ensuring students integration into the

department and may inadvertently, through their contradictory perspectives, foster the threat-oriented environment suggested by Rosen and Bates [17].

Contradictions also emerged between the recommendations made by national policy makers [1,2,6,9,14,15,19] and the arts and science faculty interviewed in this study. For example, national graduate education policy makers have recommended that faculty take the initiative in scheduling regular and periodic meetings with their students throughout the duration of a student's graduate program. In contrast, the majority of the faculty interviewed, stated having no regular or formal communication schedule with their students asserting that maintaining communications with advisors was students responsibility. Further, faculty felt that it was not their duty to seek students out if they have not heard from them in awhile.

A second example is the recommendation of national graduate education policy makers that department faculty should clearly state the expectations they have of their students and be responsible mentors for their students. In contrast, faculty in this study routinely expressed a dislike for the term mentoring, a "buzzword" they viewed with resentment. Faculty advisors, for the most part, felt little obligation to facilitate, establish, or maintain a student's motivation and commitment to their studies arguing that commitment must be generated intrinsically by the student or else a student should not be pursuing the Ph.D. Faculty perceived the problems encountered by students to be generated by the students themselves and rarely, if ever, perceived student problems to be the result of actions or behaviors of individual faculty or the department. Many faculty expressed indifference as to whether or not students stayed or left their program of study and voiced little concern for high attrition or low completion rates. Typically, faculty perceived themselves and their departments as guiltless with respect to student attrition particularly if the students who left were not "superb" students.

Conclusion

Academe is a complex organization beset by a number of organized contradictions. Contradictions within complex organizations are common; the academic environment of a large research university is no exception. The results of this study indicate that faculty perspectives with respect to doctoral persistence are often contradictory. Faculty perceive that students are often immature and naive yet expect them to identify foci of study with little, if any, guidance. They expect students to take the initiative in maintaining communications yet admit to being brusque with them and often reprimanding them in front of others. Faculty are concerned about the current job market for graduates yet have been negligent in modifying the curricula to provide cross-training for non-academic careers.

The consequence of these contradictions may be to subject doctoral students to a culture of defeat through ill-defined and vague expectations laden with incongruities. This culture of defeat may discourage graduate students at various point in the doctoral education process thereby leading to their attrition from programs. National policy makers propose recommendations to clarify the process and procedures of graduate education. Yet, given the vital role that faculty play in graduate education and the contradictory climate in which graduate students may function, clarity in policies and process may be moot. The results of this study do not call to question the willingness of faculty to invest in graduate education in general. Rather, they reflect the idiosyncratic and contradictory nature of faculty investment in, hence commitment to, individual students. As Rozycki [18], points out " 'clarity' becomes dysfunctional when commitment is uncertain".

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